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THE PITMAN GALLERY

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THE PITMAN GALLERY

GAUGUIN

(1848 - 1903)

*with an introduction
and notes by
Herbert Read*

PITMAN PUBLISHING CORPORATION
NEW YORK LONDON

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Introduction by Herbert Read

We must first distinguish between the art and the legend. To thousands, perhaps millions of people, the name of Gauguin signifies something typical, even something heroic. He is the stockbroker, the ordinary middle-class salaried man, who threw up a good job to devote his whole time to 'art'. More than that, he is the artist who revolted against the ugliness and deceptiveness of modern civilisation and went to the South Seas, to warmth and colour, innocence and *naïveté*. Novels and plays, and biographies that read like novels, have been written round his romantic life-story, until the facts, which are not quite so romantic, have been forgotten. So ubiquitous is this legend, so answering to some deep longing in our breasts, that the paintings to which Gauguin devoted all his energies and all his thoughts, no longer seem to exist in their own rights, but seem to have become part of the iconography of the legend.

We must try to recover the facts—or rather, to correct the emphasis given to the facts in the public imagination. The facts are not in doubt—they have been presented in two collections of letters,¹ in the biography by his son Pola,² and in numerous volumes of reminiscences by his contemporaries. In so far as these facts concern the personal character of Gauguin, we may be tempted to exercise our moral judgement. Gauguin deliberately deserted his wife and four young children, left them to fend for themselves as best they might, and for twenty years remained indifferent to their fate. That is the brutal aspect of the facts. There is, however, another aspect. Once his decision was made, Gauguin made no concessions to himself. All his property, including the proceeds of the choice collection of pictures he had made, he gave to his wife. He loved his children—so much so that he took his eldest son, Clovis, to share his poverty in Paris—perhaps, from the point of view of the child, not the kindest thing he could have done. In Tahiti he kept a Journal for his daughter Aline, and when she died his grief was expressed in two letters to his wife, one so bitter that she destroyed it, the other sentimental enough to have survived ('I have lost my daughter, I no longer love God. Like my mother, she was called Aline—everyone loves after his own fashion, for some love is exalted in the presence of death, for others . . . I don't know. Her grave there, with its flowers, is all an illusion. Her grave is here by my side; my tears are its flowers,

¹ *Lettres à Daniel de Monfreid. Précédées d'un hommage par Victor Segalen.* Paris, 1919. New edition (Librairie Plon), 1950. *Lettres de Gauguin à sa femme et à ses amis. Recueillies et préfacées par Maurice Malingue.* Paris (Grasset), 1947.

² *My Father Paul Gauguin.* London (Cassell), 1937.

living flowers.') These were the last letters he ever wrote to his wife, and her comment shows to what depths of bitterness she had been driven: 'His ferocious egoism revolts me every time I think of it.'

Egoism it undoubtedly was, and nothing was ever to move Gauguin from the dedication of his life to what he conceived to be an end justifying the renunciation of all human bonds. Such fanaticism in another milieu is held to be saintly, and though from a religious point of view there could be no greater heresy, Gauguin had substituted the love of Beauty for the love of God, and his life only makes sense when this is realised. Nevertheless, when he made his great decision he was actuated, not only by a blind faith in his own destiny, but by a confident hope that once all his time and energy were devoted to painting, his reputation would be secured, his paintings would sell, and he would still be able to support his family. But, of course, his paintings did not sell—he was merely able to produce more and not necessarily better unsaleable paintings. His savings disappeared in eight months. He retreated to Copenhagen, to sponge on his wife's parents for a year and a half. He made himself so disagreeable to everyone there that finally he had to return to Paris, where for six months he lived in conditions of terrible poverty and distress. The rest of his life is to be interpreted, not so much as a flight from civilisation, but rather as a desperate search for the lowest possible cost of living. He went to Brittany, not because he had any love for the country or the seaside, but because he heard that at the *pension* of Marie-Jeanne Gloanec in Pont-Aven one could live for £2 or £3 a month. When he found that he could not earn even that small amount by his painting, he began to think of those tropical islands where the food grew on trees and where even clothing was not a necessity. 'May the day come', he wrote to his wife, 'and soon, when I shall go and bury myself in the woods of an island in Oceania, live there joyfully and calmly with my art! Far from my family, far from this European struggle for money. There, in Tahiti, I shall be able, in the silence of the lovely tropical nights, to listen to the soft murmuring music of the movements of my heart in loving harmony with the mysterious beings who surround me. True, at last, without money troubles, I shall be able to love, sing, and die . . .'¹

We, who know that atomic bombs have been dropped on 'an island in Oceania', can be wise after the event. We know now that there is no escape from 'this European struggle for money', and if we are artists of some

¹ Translated by Robert Burnett, in his *Life of Paul Gauguin.* London (Cobden Sanderson), 1936, p. 106.



Plate 1. *Flowerpiece*. See page 24

sort, we can see that we are caught in a trap from which there is no escape. We either sacrifice our art to stockbroking or some similar occupation and keep ourselves and our families in a reasonable state of comfort; or we repeat Gauguin's mistake in a world where innocence and *naïveté* no longer exist, where currency restrictions and exit visas effectively deprive us of even Gauguin's illusion of liberty. Our immobilisation is our rectitude, and I am suggesting that it is not a good ground for the criticism of Gauguin's moral failure. Let us turn to the

art for which Gauguin endured everything, sacrificed everything and everybody.

It does not seem that Gauguin had any idea of becoming a painter before, at the age of twenty-three, he entered a stockbroker's office and met Emile Schuffenecker, a fellow employee who was an enthusiastic amateur painter. It was *le bon Schuff* who first inspired him and always encouraged him, and the pupil immediately revealed innate gifts and made rapid progress. Within four years he had had a painting accepted for the

Salon. That was in 1876. The first 'impressionist' exhibition had been held in 1874—it included, along with the work of artists now forgotten, paintings by Degas, Cézanne, Monet, Berthe Morisot, Pissarro, Renoir and Sisley. Gauguin became an enthusiast of the new school—he began to collect their paintings and to study the theories that inspired them. He cultivated the friendship of Pissarro, who could claim to be a Dane, and therefore a compatriot of Gauguin's wife, for he had been born in the Danish West Indies. Pissarro introduced Gauguin to his fellow-impressionists, and he gradually became one of them, exhibiting with them for the first time in 1880. He was later to renounce impressionism, and to quarrel with most of the impressionists; but there is no doubt that for about ten years he was committed to the theory and the practice of this school. Degas remained his most admired master (and Degas repaid his admiration with a faith in Gauguin that survived the disappointment of most of his friends of this time); but Pissarro was the most direct influence to which he submitted. Late in 1883 Gauguin went to Rouen to be near Pissarro, and he carried his discipleship to the length of sitting side by side with Pissarro and painting the same subject.¹ These impressionist paintings of Gauguin's are not often seen by the public—they are mostly in Scandinavian collections—but they have considerable merits and give some substance to the view, which Pissarro among others held, that Gauguin was later misled by the false theories of art he adopted. A nude of 1880 now in the Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, drew from Huysmans the declaration that no contemporary painter, not even Courbet, had rendered the nude with such vehement realism. Huysmans' description of the picture is in itself a piece of vehement realism.

The decisive change in Gauguin's style—it is not too much to call it a transformation—took place quite suddenly in the year 1888, and must be attributed to his meeting with a painter called Emile Bernard, already a friend of Van Gogh and a young man of great charm, fine sensibility and prodigious intelligence. At the age of twenty, as he then was, Bernard had already evolved a theory of art based on his passion for medieval stained glass, *images d'Épinal* (coloured broadsheets), peasant art, Japanese woodcuts—a theory to which he gave the name 'synthetism'. It is based on the idea that the imagination retains the essential form of things, and that this essential form is a simplification of the perceptual image. The memory only retains what is significant—in a certain sense, what is symbolic. What is retained is a 'schema', a simple linear structure with the colours reduced to their prismatic purity. Maurice Denis, who became one of the adepts of the new theory, adds this

¹ Reproduced (Plates 6 and 7) in *Camille Pissarro: Letters to his Son Lucien*, edited by John Rewald. London (Kegan Paul), 1943.

useful gloss: 'To synthetise is not necessarily to simplify in the sense of suppressing certain parts of the object: it is to simplify in the sense of rendering intelligible. It is in fact to . . . submit each picture to one dominant rhythm, to sacrifice, to subordinate, to generalise.'

It has been argued that Gauguin had arrived at these principles before he came under the influence of Bernard, and certainly some of the pictures he painted in Martinique in 1887 show a new emphasis on linear design, a greater simplicity of composition, and an increasing richness of colour. But they are still 'true to nature'—there is nothing schematic about them and no trace of the symbolism which makes a sudden appearance with paintings like *The Yellow Christ* (Plate 5) and *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (Plate 3), painted in 1888 and 1889. There can be no doubt that the influence of Bernard on Gauguin was profound and decisive. It completely obliterated the influence of the impressionists. Pissarro's comment, in a letter to his son Lucien, is a sad recognition of this fact:

'According to him [Albert Aurier, who had written an article on Gauguin in the *Mercure de France*] what in the last instance can be dispensed with in a work of art is drawing or painting; only ideas are essential and these can be indicated by a few symbols. —Now I will grant that art is as he says, except that "the few symbols" have to be drawn, after all; moreover it is also necessary to express ideas in terms of colour, hence you have to have sensations in order to have ideas . . . The Japanese practised this art as did the Chinese, and their symbols are wonderfully natural, but then they were not Catholics and Gauguin is a Catholic. —I do not criticise Gauguin for having painted a rose background nor do I object to the two struggling fighters and the Breton peasants in the foreground—what I dislike is that he copied these elements from the Japanese, the Byzantine painters and others. I criticise him for not applying his synthesis to our modern philosophy which is absolutely social, anti-authoritarian, and anti-mystical.—There is where the problem becomes serious. This is a step backwards; Gauguin is not a seer, he is a schemer who has sensed that the bourgeoisie are moving to the right, recoiling before the great idea of solidarity which sprouts among the people—an instinctive idea, but fecund, the only idea that is permissible.'¹

This was written in April 1891, about the time that Gauguin was embarking on the ship that was to take him to Tahiti; before, therefore, the characteristic work of Gauguin which would justify such criticism had been painted. But in paintings such as the portrait of his friend Meyer de Haan (*Nirvana*, 1890—now in the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, U.S.A.) and *La Belle Angèle* (1889—now in the Louvre) he had already revealed the style based on the new theory, and all that Tahiti was

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 163–4.

to add was a more exotic, a more colourful subject-matter. The *Nirvana* of 1890 bears an astonishing resemblance to the *Contes Barbares* of 1902 (Folkwang Museum, Essen). When Gauguin met Bernard he had only fifteen more years to live: it is a period of complete consistency, of ideals once and for all conceived in their finality and carried through with an unrelenting power of will.

It will be noticed that Pissarro's criticism of Gauguin has two aspects—one is social and the other technical, and they remain the two aspects from which Gauguin's work can still be criticised. To what degree do we still feel them to be valid? There is no doubt that from the point of view of the 'socialist realist', Gauguin's later work represents a flight from reality; it is an escapist art. But I think it must be admitted that, on a large view of its history and development, one of the functions of art is to be 'escapist'. The world is apt to be 'too much with us', and we retreat into day-dreaming or fantasy as a natural reaction. Such reactions have a therapeutic value, a biological function; they are thus a part of the dialectical process of life itself. In this sense the landscapes of the gentle Pissarro are as much an 'escape' as the symbolic compositions of Gauguin. Gauguin's condemnation of modern society was as strong as Pissarro's and much more fiercely expressed. 'A terrible epoch is being prepared in Europe for the coming generation: the reign of Gold. Everything is rotten, both men and the arts. Here one is incessantly distracted.' Such were the reasons he gave (to the Danish painter Willemsen) for going to Tahiti. The mistake he made was to assume that 'there', in Tahiti, one could avoid the distractions of modern civilisation. Unfortunately its evils are ubiquitous and Pissarro was right in believing that one has to fight it at the centre, with steadfastness and solidarity.

But the more serious criticism is the technical one. Pissarro was willing to accept the validity of a symbolic art, but the symbolism must be genuine (not taken over from past civilisations) because only a genuine symbolism could evoke in the painter the necessary 'sensations'—and without these sensations the painting would lack sensibility: it would be coarse and schematic. Admittedly Gauguin does not carry the research into the subtleties of sensation to the degree that Pissarro did, or Cézanne. That was not his aim. Nevertheless, carried away by the broad generalisations of criticism, it is easy to underestimate the purely 'painterly' qualities of Gauguin's work. A critic who in this respect was the most exacting I have ever known, the late Sir Charles Holmes, once pointed out that the best of Gauguin's works 'do very much more than combine formidable colour with striking and audacious design. They have real substance. The figures are admirably modelled in very low relief, and the paintings have a 'complex' underlying their outward pattern. They seem haunted by some spell of savage

magic and mystery, an indwelling spirit, which in this age of the sceptic and the materialist is naturally suspect. . . . Nor is his colour as simple as it seems. If we take the trouble to examine it closely we shall find that under its apparent crude force there are unexpected subtleties of gradation, the outcome of a deliberate refining process based on Gauguin's early Impressionist training. What looks like a vivid patch of pure yellow, for example, will prove to be modified towards one extremity by little touches of blue or green—at the other the modification may be red or orange. These interweavings, this ever-changing texture, give Gauguin's best works a subtlety which, added to his undeniable vitality and breadth, make him one of the men we should do well to consider seriously, whatever we may be told to his discredit.'¹

I can add little to such an admirable summary. There is, however, in Gauguin's colour, a quality that might be characterised by the word 'resonance': it distinguishes him from all his contemporaries. When he was in Brittany he once wrote to his friend Schuffenecker: 'Quand mes sabots retombent sur ce sol de granit, j'entends le son sourd mat et puissant que je cherche en peinture.' Harmony is not confined to a restricted range of the colour-scale: it is not necessarily 'subdued' to a dominant tone—it can be keyed up to a vibrant pitch of primary oppositions, revelling in the richness of saturation rather than in a finesse of transitions. Finally, colour itself is (or can be) symbolic—as Gauguin realised ('la couleur étant elle-même énigmatique dans les sensations qu'elle nous donne, on ne peut logiquement l'employer qu'énigmatiquement'). Colour no less than form has significance within the unconscious, and by a too conscious control (a 'scientific' control such as the Impressionists attempted) we may destroy its proper force.

The rhythmical quality of Gauguin's compositions is perhaps obvious enough, but it is one more technical accomplishment and with the rest we have noted, disposes of the easy assumption that Gauguin was merely a 'literary' painter. Literary he certainly was—it was one of his deliberate aims to reinfuse painting with dramatic significance—but he never forgot that the drama must have form as well as substance. That he was a 'decorative' painter must again be admitted, and no doubt some of his qualities would have been better applied to monumental art rather than to the confined space of the cabinet-picture. 'Des murs, des murs, donnez-lui des murs,' cried his friend Albert Aurier.² Gauguin would have been a greater artist had he belonged to a community ready to make use of his great gifts. As it was, he was condemned to live in an epoch that reserved for its artists the most vicious instruments in its armoury of neglect.

¹ *Old Masters and Modern Art: The National Gallery: France and England*. London (Bell), 1927, p. 137.

² Quoted by Maurice Malingue: *Gauguin, le peintre et son œuvre*. Paris and London (Les Presses de la Cité and James Ripley), 1948, p. 50.

Plate 2

BRITTANY FARMYARD SCENE

1888

Formerly in the Collection of Captain Ernest Duveen

42 in. by 36 in.

This painting belongs to the period of Gauguin's second stay at Pont-Aven, Brittany (February–October, 1888). It still shows distinct signs of the Impressionist style to which Gauguin had up till then been devoted—particularly the influence of Seurat and Signac in its 'pointilliste' technique (the stippling or juxtaposition of small 'points' or touches of pure colour to avoid the impurities due to the mixing of colour on the palette). There are references to 'points' in Gauguin's correspondence of this year. Writing to Emile Bernard in October 1888 he says: 'In this connection Van Gogh [Théo] has written a very curious thing to Vincent. I have, he says, seen Seurat who has made some admirable studies representing a good workman relishing his titbit. Signac is always rather cold: he seems to me like a traveller in little dots.'¹

Gauguin had visited Martinique in 1887 and had returned with a desire to get more brilliance into his compositions. He is already moving from the carefully modulated greys and greens, the 'good and simple nature', of an Impressionist like Pissarro, who had been his master in 1884. Nevertheless Pissarro's influence, and perhaps Cézanne's, is still evident in the composition of this picture.

¹ Gauguin: *Letters to his Wife and Friends*. Edited by Maurice Malingue. Trans. by Henry J. Stenning. London, Saturn Press. p. 101.



Plate 3

JACOB WRESTLING WITH THE ANGEL

(La Vision après le Sermon)

1888

Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland

28½ in. by 36 in.

This is one of the most significant of all Gauguin's paintings: it marks his decisive break with Impressionism and is the first considerable work painted under the influence of Emile Bernard. In a letter to his friend Emile Schuffenecker, written at Quimperlé, 8 October, 1888, Gauguin evidently refers to the recent completion of this painting: 'I have painted a picture for a church; of course, it was refused, so I am sending it to Van Gogh [Théo, Vincent's brother, who was an art dealer] . . . This year I have sacrificed all, execution and colouring, for style, intending to compel myself to do something different from what I usually do.' The village whose curé refused the gift was Nizon, near Pont-Aven.

The painting was, at the time, of striking originality, both in the rhythmical boldness of its composition and as a work of symbolic rather than naturalistic content. The influences of peasant art, of medieval stained glass, of Japanese prints, had combined, under Bernard's influence, to form that 'synthétisme' which released the artist from the dependence on visual actuality demanded by Impressionism. Colour confined within firmly outlined compartments (which gives the painting a resemblance to the so-called 'cloisonné' technique in enamelling, where the colours are actually separated by metal strips) is as far away as possible from the impressionist technique, which had tried to abolish the outline altogether, to merge one colour gradually into its neighbour. Added to this innovation was the unnaturalistic function of the colours themselves—the red ground, for example.



Plate 4

HARVEST IN BRITTANY

1889

London: Courtauld Institute. Home House Trustees

36¼ in. by 28¾ in.

Gauguin returned to Brittany in April 1889, after his three-months stay with Van Gogh in Arles and a similar period in Paris. He remained there until the beginning of the next year. In the summer, in order to escape the trippers who flocked to the sea-side at Pont-Aven, he hired a room in a farm at Avains, a neighbouring village, and here presumably he painted this picture. He wrote to Emile Bernard at this time: 'I am floundering in a slough of despond and struggling with work which requires a certain time for completion. I find pleasure, not in going farther along the lines I prepared formerly, but in trying something fresh. I feel it if I cannot explain it. I am certain to get there eventually, but slowly in spite of my impatience. In these conditions, my tentative studies yield only a maladroit and amateur result.'¹

What Gauguin was striving after can be seen in this canvas—a great simplification of the composition (elimination of shadows, precisely outlined forms, etc.), a dominating rhythm, and fresh, powerful colour. The influence of Emile Bernard is to be traced, not only in these new stylistic developments, but also in the choice of a subject from peasant life. The break with Impressionism is now complete.

¹ Trans. Stenning, *op. cit.*, p. 122.



Plate 5

THE YELLOW CHRIST

(Le Christ jaune)

1889

Essen: The Folkwang Museum

36¼ in. by 28¾ in.

This painting belongs to the same phase of Gauguin's development as Plate 3, and as the *Breton Calvary* in the Musée Royal, Brussels. Some notes for the composition of these canvases, found among the papers of Albert Aurier, art critic of the *Mercur de France*, and one of Gauguin's earliest admirers, are of great interest. They are reproduced by Maurice Malingue as an Appendix to his edition of the Letters and show the state of Gauguin's feelings at the time he conceived these pictures—for example:

Christ

Special agony of the betrayal
applying to Jesus today and tomorrow
small explanatory group
the whole sober harmony
sombre colours and
red—supernatural

In a letter to Bernard of about this time (November, 1889), Gauguin writes: 'I have been groping within myself for a more elevated sensibility, and I seem almost to have grasped it this year.' Again: 'Let them (the public) study carefully my last pictures and, if they have any feelings at all, they will see what resigned suffering is in them—a cry wrung from the heart. But thus it was written—that I have no heart, that I must be wicked, cross-grained and prickly.'¹

It is significant that Bernard was also painting pictures of Christ at this time, of which he sent Gauguin photographs (see letter of 16 November, 1889).

¹ Trans. Stenning, *op. cit.*



Plate 6

NEVERMORE

1897

London: Courtauld Institute. Home House Trustees

23¼ in. by 45½ in.

Gauguin to Daniel de Monfreid (14 February, 1897): 'I have tried to suggest a certain bygone barbaric luxury in a simple nude. . . . The whole picture in deliberately sombre, melancholy colours; it is neither silk nor velvet nor batiste nor gold that gives this luxurious quality but simply a richness created by the hand of the artist. . . . The title, *Never more*; not "The Raven" of Edgar Poe but the devil's own bird biding its time. It is badly painted (I am so nervous and I work by fits and starts) but no matter, I think it is a good picture.'

The following passage from a letter to August Strindberg, though written two years earlier (5 February, 1895) is perhaps pertinent: 'Studying the Eve of my choice, whom I have painted in forms and harmonies of a different world, she whom you elect to enthrone, evokes perhaps melancholy reflections. The Eve of your civilised imagination makes nearly all of us misogynists: the Eve of primitive times who, in my studio, startles you now may one day smile on you less bitterly. The world I am discovering, which may perhaps never find a Cuvier or a naturalist, is a Paradise the outlines of which I shall have merely sketched out. And between the sketch and the realisation of the vision there is a long way to go. What matters! If we have a glimpse of happiness, what is it but a foretaste of *Nirvana*?'

'The Eve I have painted—and she alone—can remain naturally naked before us. Yours, in this simple state, could move not without a feeling of shame, and too beautiful, perhaps, would provoke misfortune and suffering.'¹

¹ Trans. Stenning, *op. cit.*, pp. 197–8.



NEVER MORE

G. C. ...

Plate 7

THREE TAHITIANS

1897

Edinburgh: Collection of Alexander Maitland, Esq.

29 in. by 37 in.

Sometimes called 'Conversation in Tahiti', this canvas was painted in Gauguin's second Tahitian period, and at the height of his misery and despair. Far away in Europe his favourite daughter Aline had died suddenly; he had been dispossessed of his house; he was ravaged by disease. Writing to William Molard in August of this year, 1897, he cried: 'Ever since my infancy misfortune has pursued me. Never any luck, never any joy. Everyone always against me, and I exclaim: God Almighty, if You exist, I charge You with injustice and spitefulness. Yes, on the news of my poor Aline's death I doubted everything, I gave a defiant laugh. What use are virtue, work, courage, intelligence?

'Crime alone is logical and rational.'¹

Yet in this state of mind he painted pictures like this, of monumental calm, languid rhythm, and rich joyful colour.

¹ Trans. Stenning, *op. cit.*



Plate 8

TWO TAHITIAN WOMEN

(*'Te Rerioa'* sometimes called *Le Rêve*)

1897

London: Courtauld Institute. Home House Trustees

37½ in. by 51¼ in.

Of this picture Gauguin wrote: 'The ship has been delayed for a fortnight, so I have taken the opportunity to paint another canvas which I think is even better than the earlier ones, in spite of the haste in execution. *Te Rerioa (le Rêve)*, that is the title. Everything is dream in this picture, whether the child, the mother, or the painter's dream!!! All this, I shall be told, is beside the point in painting. Who knows? Perhaps not.' (Letter to Daniel de Monfreid, 12 March, 1897.) In another letter two years later (to André Fontainas, March, 1899) he evoked the atmosphere that inspired his Tahitian pictures:

'Here, near my hut, in complete silence, I dream of violent harmonies in the natural scents which intoxicate me.

'A delight distilled from some indescribable sacred horror which I glimpse of far-off things. The odour of an antique joy which I am breathing in the present. Animal shapes of a statuesque rigidity: indescribably antique, august, and religious in the rhythm of their gesture, in their singular immobility. In the dreaming eyes is the overcast surface of an unfathomable enigma.

'And comes the night when all things are at rest. My eyes close in order to see without comprehending the dream in the infinite space stretching out before me, and I have the sensation of the melancholy progress of my hopes.'¹

Of such pictures the poet Mallarmé wrote: 'It is extraordinary that so much mystery can be put into so much splendour.'

¹ Trans. Stenning, *op. cit.*, p. 216.



Plate 9
TAHITIAN PASTORAL
(*Faa Iheihe*)

(Detail)

1898

London: Tate Gallery

(Whole picture) 21 in. by 66 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.

An example of Gauguin's more deliberately decorative style. Executed in the same year as the much larger decorative canvas *D'où venons nous? Que sommes nous? Où allons nous?* now in the Boston Museum of Art. All his life Gauguin had felt admiration for the work of Puvis de Chavannes (1824–98), the supreme decorative painter of his time, and he envied Puvis's escape from the limitations of the cabinet picture. The year after he painted this canvas, in the letter to André Fontainas from which we have already quoted (March, 1899), Gauguin wrote: 'You see I have failed to understand the value of words—abstract or concrete—in the dictionary. I cannot grasp them any better in painting. I have tried in suggestive ornament to translate my dream without any resort to literary methods, with all the simplicity possible to my craft, a difficult task. Accuse me if you like of having failed in this, but not of having attempted it, advising me to change my aim and toil after other ideas, already admitted and consecrated. Puvis de Chavannes is the supreme example of this. To be sure, Puvis overwhelms me with his talent and the experience that I lack; I admire him all the more and as much as you but for different reasons. (Do not be offended as you begin to go into this matter more deeply.) Each has his age.'¹ He added: 'The State does right in not commissioning me to decorate any public building, as such decoration would clash with the ideas of the majority, and I should have done wrong in accepting such a commission with no alternative but to cheat or to do a violence to my own feelings'—but this confession serves to show how seriously Gauguin had entertained the idea of becoming a mural painter.

¹ Trans. Stenning, *op. cit.*



Plate 10
THE SUMMONS
(*L'Appel*)

1902

Cleveland, Ohio: Museum of Fine Art

51¼ in. by 35½ in.

An example of Gauguin's painting from his final period, when he had fled from Tahiti to settle in La Dominique (Hive-Oa), Marquisas Islands. Apart from material reasons for the change, Gauguin had felt in need of new inspiration. 'I believe that in the Marquisas [he wrote to de Monfreid], what with the ease in getting models [which was becoming more and more difficult in Tahiti] and with new landscapes to explore—in short, altogether new and more savage subjects, I shall do some fine things. Here my imagination begins to grow cold, and then the public is getting too used to Tahiti. The world is so stupid that when one gives them pictures containing new and *terrible* subjects, Tahiti will become understandable and charming. My Breton canvases became rose-water after Tahiti; Tahiti will become eau de cologne after the Marquisas.' In the event, his Marquisan canvases were to be more idyllic and 'charming' than those of Tahiti. He was enchanted by the natives and by the scenery, and in spite of terrible physical sufferings and quarrels with the Authorities (Church and State) produced in these last two years of his life some of the greatest of his paintings (. . . *Et l'or de leur corps, Contes barbares* (Folkwang Museum, Essen), *Marquisiens à cheval*). 'Here poetry is spontaneous (*se dégage toute seule*) and it is only necessary to let oneself dream while painting to suggest it—I need only two years of health and not too many financial worries . . . in order to reach a certain maturity in my art. I feel that in art *I am right*, but shall I have the strength to express myself in a positive way? In any case I shall have done my duty and if my works do not survive, there will remain the memory of an artist who freed painting from many of its former academic defects and from its symbolist defects (another form of sentimentality).'

A sketch for this painting was reproduced in the book which Gauguin wrote in Hive-Oa (*Avant et Après*).



Note on Plate 1

FLOWER PIECE

1896

London: Tate Gallery

25 in. by 29 in.

From the beginning of his career as an artist Gauguin occasionally painted still-lives, but never so often nor so well as during his last years in Tahiti (1895–1903), to which period this fine example belongs. His despair at this time was overwhelming, but he found solace in the colour of tropical flowers and the beauty of the native women. In 1900 he wrote (to Emmanuel Bibesco): ‘You mention painted flowers, I do not know which, despite the few number of them I have done: and this is owing to the fact (which you have no doubt noticed) of my not being a painter according to nature—to-day less than before. To me everything happens in my wild imagination. And when I am tired of drawing figures (my predilection) I begin on still-life which I finish, moreover, without a model. Then this is not really the country of flowers.’¹

‘It is immensely superior to other flower paintings through the breadth of the handling, the rhythm of its design, and, above all, by the richness and balance of its colour. The black pot flanked and balanced on either side by the large blue leaves, the swing of the fringe of red flowers which break above and mingle with the greyish white petals and the yellow-gold background, all compose a sort of symphony of colour expressed with perfect art, unconfused and unhurried by emotion, and yet conceived in the glow of experience, of suffering, of joy.’²

¹ Trans. Stenning, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

² J. B. Manson in *The Tate Gallery*. London (Jack), 1930. p. 193.

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R. H. W.

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